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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effect of ambiguity on the level of writing apprehension of English teachers and whether apprehension varied according to mode of discourse. Subjects, 28 English language arts teachers, were invited to participate in a 5-week summer writing workshop, for which they received university credit and stipends. Participants were screened on the basis of exemplary teaching, writing ability, and interpersonal skills, and completed the Writing Apprehension Test at the beginning of the project. Teachers were required to produce six writing assignments, three of which were presented in an ambiguous manner, and three of which were presented unambiguously. Immediately following the submission of each paper, the teachers completed a 12-statement attitude scale to measure apprehension on the previously submitted writing assignment. Results showed that ambiguity affected low apprehensive writers slightly more than it did high apprehensive writers. In addition, apprehension tended to remain more constant across modes of discourse with high apprehensive writers than with low apprehensive writers. Finally, practice seemed to have no measurable effect on levels of apprehension. (DF)

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The Effect of Ambiguity on the Situational Anxiety of Writing Teachers Attending a Summer Workshop

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Writer's anxiety can be defined as "the dispositional tendency of people to avoid writing and writing related activities" (Daly and Hailey, 1884). Not confined to school children, this anxiety is found in adults, even professional adults such as teachers.

Background

Writing anxiety, or writing apprehension, has been systematically studied over the last decade. Among the findings are (1) that high apprehensives are less tolerant of ambiguity than are low apprehensives (Miller and Daly, 1975) and (2) that high apprehensives are evaluated as having lower quality of writing than do their less apprehensive counterparts (Daly, 1977; Daly and Miller, 1975). Daly and Hailey (1984) maintain that writing apprehension is not a static, or dispositional, characteristic, but rather a varying, or situational quality. Ambiguity, the lack of clarity concerning the assignment and the expectations of the evaluator, can produce increased anxiety; whereas, the removal of ambiguity would tend to reduce it. Teachers, then, confronted with ambiguity in a writing assignment, might be more apprehensive than they would be with a more clearly articulated assignment.

Although most of the research on apprehension focuses on school-age children and adolescents, three studies have dealt with professional adults, specifically teachers. Daly (1979) measured the role expectancies held by 33 elementary and secondary school teachers about apprehensive

writers. By having teachers react to descriptions of hypothetical students, Daly discovered that teachers predicted more academics and occupational success for low apprehensive writers. In addition, Daly found sex bias when teachers (all female) favored low apprehensive girls and high apprehensive boys. During a summer staff development workshop, Donlan (1983) gave The Writing Apprehension Test to 27 English teachers randomly assigned to 2 treatment groups as a means of establishing additional equality of groups.

Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott (1984) correlated teachers' writing apprehension scores with four scales: (1) attitudes toward the importance of standard English, (2) the importance of defining and evaluating writing tasks, (3) the importance of student self-expression, and (4) the importance of linguistic maturity. For elementary school teachers, there was a negative correlation between writing apprehension and attitudes toward the importance of linguistic maturity. For secondary school teachers, there was a positive correlation between writing apprehension and the importance of standard English and defining and evaluating writing tasks, and a negative correlation between writing apprehension and the importance of student self-expression and linguistic maturity.

Purpose of the Study

Given research findings on situational anxiety and the relationship of anxiety and teacher attitudes, we first wanted to investigate the effect

of ambiguity on the level of writing apprehension of English teachers. Second, we wanted to determine if apprehension varied according to mode of discourse. Third, we wanted to see if practice in writing reduced apprehension.

Study Design

Using a 2 X 3 factorial design, we sought to measure the effect of ambiguity upon apprehension across three modes of discourse. Three papers would be assigned, one from each mode, without enabling instructions (ambiguous); three papers would be assigned with instructional guidance (unambiguous). The modes of discourse used would be poetry, narration, and persuasion:

	Poetry	Narration	Persuasion
ambiguous (A)			
unambiguous (U)			

Procedure

The Subjects

Twenty-eight English language arts teachers (25 women and 3 men) were invited to participate in a five-week summer writing workshop, for which they received university credit and stipends. The group was select: participants were screened on the basis of exemplary teaching, as documented by their district administrators; on writing ability, as

evidenced by a writing sample; and on interpersonal skills, as evaluated during a group interview. Of the 28 teachers, 9 were from primary grades, 10 were from intermediate grades, 3 from junior high school, and 6 from high school. As a group, the teachers had an average of 7 years teaching experience, with a range from 1 year to 20 years.

The Writing Assignments

During the summer workshop, teachers were required to produce six writing assignments. Assignments #1 and #2 required poetry, #3 and #4 required narrative writing; #5 and #6 required persuasive writing. Assignments 1, 4, and 5 were presented in an ambiguous manner; assignments 2, 3, and 6 were presented unambiguously. Sequence or treatments in each pair was determined by coin toss.

The Treatments

Assignments 1, 4, and 5 were presented ambiguously (A). Directions were given orally and teachers were given only one night to prepare each assignment for submission. Directions were brief: e.g., write a long poem or series of short poems and bring them to class tomorrow." No other guidance was offered.

Assignments 2, 3, and 6 were presented unambiguously (U), with motivational devices, pre-writing exercises, in-class composing time and with peer editing and revising groups. On occasion, teachers were given models to follow.

Assessing Apprehension

At the outset of the project, teachers were administered the Writing Apprehension Test to establish baseline data. Immediately following the submission of each paper, teachers filled out a 12- statement, 4-point attitude scale that would measure apprehension on the previously submitted writing assignment. Ten of the items were geared to specific stages in the composing process and 2 items measured general apprehension. The attitude measure was presented in two reverse forms, each with six positive statements and six negative statements. Table 1 indicates the sequence of assignments and their correlative treatments and evaluation forms:

Table 1

Sequence of Writing Assignments and
Correlative Treatments and Evaluation Forms

Assignment	Mode	Directions	Treatment	Evaluation Form
1	Poetry	Write a long poem or collection of short poems.	A	1
2	Poetry		U	1
3	Narration	Write a fairy tale.	U	2
4	Narration	Write a children's story.	A	2
5	Persuasion	Design the perfect system for evaluating papers and defend it.	A	1
6		Write a position paper on the teaching of writing.	U	2

The attitude scales were converted to numbers and scores were derived. On a given scale, the highest possible score was 48 (12 items X 4 points); the lowest possible score was 12 (12 items X 1 point). Mean scores were derived (1) by assignment, (2) by mode of discourse, and (3) by treatment. A high score indicated low apprehension.

Results

Total Group

Anxiety remained constant over the first four assignments. In effect, whether poetry and narrative writing assignments were presented ambiguously or unambiguously did little to alter the level of apprehension. However, apprehension increased on assignment #5 (ambiguous) and dropped on assignment #6 (unambiguous). Table 2 contains the data on all six assignments. Apparently, with this group, anxiety was affected by treatment in persuasive writing but not in poetic or narrative writing.

Table 2

Apprehension Scores (X and SD)
for Six Writing Assignments

Assignment	X*	SD
1 (Poetry)	34.89	6.1
2 (Poetry)	34.92	7.48
3 (Narration)	34.32	5.65
4 (Narration)	34.10	7.09
5 (Persuasion)	32.92	6.44
6 (Persuasion)	35.85	5.48

* High scores = low apprehension

High Versus Low Apprehensives

Using the scores on the initially administered Writing Apprehension Test, we divided the 28 participants equally into 14 high apprehensives and 14 low apprehensives to determine differential treatment effect. As the data in Table 3 suggest, the level of apprehension remained fairly constant for high apprehension writers except with the last assignment, where it was reduced. On the other hand, low apprehensives "waffled" slightly, depending on mode and treatment.

Table 3

Apprehension Scores (X and SD)
On Six Writing Assignments According to
High and Low Apprehensives

Assignment	High APP	Low APP
1 A	32.91 (5.43)	36.9 (5.88)
2 U	31.6 (7.3)	38.2 (5.6)
3 U	32.4 (4.49)	36.0 (5.43)
4 A	31.7 (5.95)	36.7 (7.03)
5 A	31.7 (8.09)	34.1 (3.43)
6 U	34.9 (5.21)	36.8 (5.38)

Table 4

Means of Mean Apprehension Scores by Mode and Treatment, According to High and Low Apprehensives

Assignment	High Apprehensive	Low Apprehensive
Poetry	32.25	37.5
Narration	32.35	36.75
Persuasion	33.3	35.5
Ambiguous Assignments	32.9	35.9
Unambiguous Assignments	32.3	37.24

By calculating the means of mean scores by mode and by treatment, we were able to detect further differentiation. As the data in Table 4 suggest, there was little fluctuation in apprehension experienced by high apprehensive writers as caused by mode or treatment. On the other hand, low apprehensive writers expressed increasinng apprehension as the assignments moved from poetry to narration to persuasion. In addition, ambiguous assignments caused them more apprehension than did unambiguous assignments.

Conclusions

Reviewing our original three research questions, we found:

1. Ambiguity affected low apprehensive writers slightly more than it did high apprehensive writers.
2. Apprehension tended to remain more constant across modes of discourse with high apprehensive writers than with low apprehensive writers.
3. Practice seemed to have no measureable effect on levels of apprehension.

These generalizations are tentative and further studies will test their strength.

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